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TONY BABIN, 52, ACTOR, DIRECTOR, FLOWER SELLER

LOCAL DRAG QUEEN BOLDLY FLAUNTED TALENTS

BY WARREN EPSTEIN
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Actor, director and drag queen Tony Babin died Wednesday at age 52.

Locals might remember Babin as that big flower guy on the corner of Austin Bluffs Parkway and Academy Boulevard, where he peddled petals while wearing funky '80s-style glasses and holding a "Not a Moonie" sign.

But those in the theater and in gay, lesbian and transgender communities remember him as something much more — an artist, a crusader and an upstart.

In the wake of Amendment 2, which would have banned gay rights laws in Colorado, Babin and his friends Jeff Milligan and Dennis Lujan formed the Upstart Performing Ensemble, a gay and lesbian troupe performing in the basement of the Hide N' Seek nightclub.

Longtime friend, colleague and collaborator Beth Clements Mosley called it "a small company of wayward saints."

Actor and makeup artist Jonathan Eberhardt called it a refuge from the closets.

"At a time when so much of the gay community wanted to just hide and disappear, Tony said, 'No, we're going to put a flag on this.' He created a place where, for the first time, people could stand in a room full of people and say, 'This is me!'"

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY MARK REIS, THE GAZETTE

A double exposure shows actor/director Tony Babin made up for his starring role in "Torch Song Trilogy" and in a more serious shot.

Since then, Upstart has grown into an acclaimed annual Gay and Lesbian Theatre Festival. The next festival outing is planned for Jan. 15 at Watch This Space, 218 W. Colorado Ave., and although Babin was already working on acting and directing, others involved with the festival say the show will go on.

But his shoes, friends say, are way too big to be filled.

"He was an incredibly hard worker — a real bootstrapper," said Mark Arnest, former Gazette theater critic. "He acted, he produced and he held two jobs, one of which entailed more exhaust fumes than anybody should have to inhale."

Fellow director Tom McElroy, aka Atomic Elroy, said he first saw Babin when he was performing "The Night They Shot John Lennon" in the back room at Poor Richard's.

"No set. No lights. Just the actors standing against one wall facing the chairs," McElroy said. "I went up to him afterwards and complimented him on his chutzpah. He just shrugged and said he never let anything stop him from doing theater."

Babin did drag shows at local gay clubs. He also performed in the Fine Arts Center's production of "La Cage Aux Folles" and other dramas and musicals.

Eberhardt appreciated his work as an actor. But it's his "half drag queen, half car wreck" sensibilities as a director that he'll miss more.

"He's always been a kind of John Waters of Colorado Springs," he said. "He was just as happy coming across as brilliant as 'Oh, my God, what did we just see?'"

Clements Mosley suggested that friends could make a flower memorial for Babin at the corner where he sold flowers.

Babin is survived by parents Peggy and Ichiro Suto; stepmother Willa Babin; brothers Carey Suto, David Babin, Troy Suto and Donald Babin Jr.; and sisters Charlene Lovell, Roxanne Lirette and Kelley Songy.

A memorial is tentatively planned for 1 p.m. Wednesday at the Fine Arts Center.

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CHRISTIAN MURDOCK, THE GAZETTE

Jonathan Eberhardt, from left, Jen Lennon, JaNae Stansbery and Sammy Gleason sang "Cabaret" during a Wednesday memorial for Tony Babin, a fixture in the Springs' theater community. Babin, 52, a director, actor and founder of the Upstart Performing Ensemble, died Dec. 10.

EMOTIONS CENTER STAGE AT BABIN'S CURTAIN CALL

Entertainment giant managed to unify fractured community

BY T.D. MOBLEY-MARTINEZ
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At the end of Wednesday's memorial, nearly 400 people came to their feet — clapping, hooting, laughing and even some crying.

It was Tony Babin's last standing ovation.

The actor, director and founder of the Upstart Performing Ensemble died suddenly Dec. 10 at age 52. A giant in Colorado Springs' tightknit world of theater, his passing packed the house at the Fine Arts Center, where Babin had often performed. And, like the man, the nearly two-hour musical tribute was anything but ordinary.

"It's only 10 after, and they're starting," whispered a man in the audience as the show/memorial began. "That's the theater for you."

A prayer came first. Then a rousing version of "Cabaret" was followed by the hymn "How Great Thou Art," "Sit

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others wouldn't'

e he would bring peo- together," said Lynne tings, an actor who ked with Babin early "In those days, some rs worked at the FAC others ... well, he totally red that line."

er it was all over and ple slowly filtered from oom, Jim Jackson stood e. He's the co-founder anitou Art Theater and n's friend since Jackson ed here in 1992. He gently moderated the tribute.

"It's ... yeah," he said, taking a deep breath. "It's the kind of thing that the word 'bittersweet' was coined for."

He laughed softly. "Every time I do these things, when they're done, I think we need to do them when people are alive. We really need to."

about his best friend.

Babin, who was an activist for gay rights, founded the ensemble not long after the passage, in 1992, of Amendment 2, which would have banned laws protecting gays and lesbians from discrimination. In Babin's world, everyone was welcome.

"Tony was amazing be-